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A BRIEF HISTORY OF RANCHO LA BREA.

BY FLORENCE JOSEPHINE SEAMAN.

When Spain first began to colonize the New World which became hers through discovery and exploration, she did not make grants of land to be held in absolute individual ownership. All occupation of land was to redound to the glory and benefit of Spain. In 1773 we find the first authority for private grants in Viceroy Bucareli's instructions to Captain Rivera, but the first private land grant to be actually made was in 1775. Previous to 1800 there were only five private grants and sixteen provincial grants in California.

Under the Mexican regime, beginning in 1823, land grants were made in very much the same way as they had been before. A general colonization law was passed and during the succeeding years we find private grants becoming more numerous. Previous to 1830 there were fifty such grants.

The grant in which we are most interested is that of the Rancho La Brea. Cabrillo discovered California in 1542, but for two hundred and twenty-five years there was no attempt at settlement. In 1769 Galvez, Vistador-General of New Spain, and Father Junipero Serra came into California with the idea of settling it. Among their party were Portolá and Father Crespi, and it is from the diaries of these two men that we first hear of the brea beds. As the party travelled north they passed the beds on the left, and Father Crespi's diary records that "to the right were extensive swamps of bitumen called *chapapote*," meaning black wax or glue. In the same records we are told that the brea was used by the Indians for calking their canoes and for fuel.

During the adobe age in California brea was used for roofing. As the brea "boiled up from the earth," as James O. Pattie expressed it, great bubbles were formed which burst, making a report which could be heard in Los Angeles pueblo about four or five miles away. At the bursting great pieces of brea were thrown out, and these laid on the roofs, and melted by the sun, made a splendid roofing.

The next record we have of the Brea ranch was in 1803, when Mariano Castro returned from Mexico with a viceregal license to occupy La Brea in the region of San Juan Bautista. There seems to have been a plan to form a settlement at La Brea of six persons, namely: Jose Rodriguez, Juan Maria Rius, Dolores Mesa, Joaquin

Castro, Antonio Buelna and Pablo. These men decided as early as 1801 to obtain said grant, and make the settlement. At that time the friars were pasturing their stock on the land desired, and they upheld their claims so well that Castro had to surrender his license and accept instead a grant of government land near Watsonville.

In 1828 Rancho La Brea was granted by Governor Echeandia to Antonio Rocha, a Portuguese blacksmith, who was one of Los Angeles' most respectable and substantial settlers. He based his claim on a grant made by Carillo, the president of the ayuntamiento, or town council, of Los Angeles, on April 8, 1828, in accordance with a petition made by himself in January, 1828. The grant was one square league, or 4444.4 acres, and the title was issued so that
"* * * The parties interested in this petition can build their corrals, place their stock, make their fields in the same terms, conditions and circumstances as the other citizens have done who have received such a favor, being responsible for care, and only to report any crime which they may notice within their boundaries.

"Carillo."¹

In the grant the right to use the brea was reversed to the citizens of Los Angeles. In 1835 we find, from the pueblo records, that there was some trouble, and the missions were accused of monopolizing this right. Upon inquiry the charge was found to be false. In this same year the city transferred its interest to Carlos Baric, who was to pay into the city treasury 5% of all sales.

Rocha built an adobe house on the ranch, and made it his home.

By the grant he was made not an absolute but only a provisional owner. It was supposed when the grant was made that it fell within the limits of Los Angeles, and that Rocha and his family were only provisional owners. Finally the ranch was sold in part, and resold until the major part of it came to Major Henry Hancock.

Major Hancock first became interested in the Pacific Coast during service in the Mexican War. The gold rush in '49 brought him to San Francisco where he opened a law office. In 1850 he came to Los Angeles which he twice represented in the State Assembly. He became a government surveyor, and surveyed most of the large ranches in Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties. He was an expert in settling grants because his familiarity with Mexican and Spanish customs and all concerned felt, to put it popularly, that they had received a square deal.

Mr. Hancock chose La Brea ranch as his home, and here he raised sheep and cattle. After the Civil War he began a systematic excavation of asphaltum. He shipped large quantities of it to San Francisco, where it was used for sidewalks and for paving. Because of the extensive excavations a large lake of asphaltum and water

1. U. S. Supreme Court Records. Wall, Vol. IX.

formed, which now resembles a boiling pot as the gases from below push up, sending out great circles of tiny waves on the surface as it escapes. While these excavations were being made, bones were frequently found which were supposed to be those of sheep, cattle and horses. Because of the large number found, the ranch was called by some "La Huesamenta," or the "Bone-yard."

When Honorable Cornelius Cole was elected United States Senator from California in 1866, as a friend of Major Hancock he agreed to have the title, which had not yet been made other than provisional as it was in 1828, perfected in the United States Supreme Court.

As has been said, people thought the grant of 1828 was within the limits of Los Angeles pueblo, therefore its owners could only claim it provisionally unless it were proved to be outside of the pueblo. In 1841 Maria Josefa, widow of Rocha, petitioned for a definite grant. The governor gave her a provisional grant until the "ejidos," or common pasture land of the pueblo, should be determined. Madam Rocha took the land provisionally until the town limits should be determined. Under Mexican rule a pueblo would contain four square leagues, but under California rule there was a question as to whether it should be four leagues square, making sixteen square leagues, under which circumstances La Brea ranch would be included, or whether it should be the four square leagues. Los Angeles petitioned the California Land Commission for sixteen square leagues, but finally received only four. Previous to this the "ejidos" of Los Angeles had never been defined or the title to La Brea ranch, which now was proved to be outside of the city, need never have been questioned. The grant never was more provisional than other grants, only Madam Rocha desired a more formal concession. Since then there was no ground for the claim being invalid, the Supreme Court pronounced it valid, basing the validity "on the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the law of nations, the laws, usages and customs of the government from which the claim is derived, the principles of equity and the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States so far as they are applicable."¹

Mr. Hancock promised Senator Cole a one-tenth individual interest in La Brea because of his handling of the case before the Supreme Court, but finally Mr. Cole chose some four hundred and eighty acres in the vicinity of Colegrove. Much of the original grant has been sold, so that at present there are only some 2075 acres intact out of the original grant.

Mr. Hancock died in 1883. Mrs. Hancock moved onto the ranch with her three children, and here she raised barley and stock to support her family. She was in fact "land poor" until about fifteen or twenty years ago, when some oil prospectors working around

1. U. S. Supreme Court Records. Wall, Vol. IX.

Buena Vista Street district in Los Angeles found oil deposits on La Brea ranch. Immediately Mrs. Hancock became one of California's richest women. At present the ranch is owned by G. Allen Hancock, her son. Its value is conservatively estimated at \$3,000,000.00, one-fourth of the ranch being devoted to oil wells bringing in an income annually of over \$300,000.00. At the present rate of increase the ranch will be worth \$100,000,000.00 in fifty years.

But the greatest interest and value in La Brea ranch at present, and in fact for all time, is in the wealth of prehistoric deposits discovered there, opening up to us a new knowledge of the animal and plant life which, at one time, existed on these golden shores.

In 1901-1902 Professor W. W. Orcutt, manager of the geological and land departments of the Union Oil Company, found some sabers of the saber-toothed tiger. In 1875 Mr. Hancock had found a saber but his find had caused little interest. As I have said, the bones were generally supposed to be those of domestic animals raised on the ranch.

In 1907 Professor Merriam of the University of California received permission to excavate in the interest of the University. He had this right during the year 1907-1908. The first public announcement of the deposits came through an article written by Prof. Merriam, and published in the *Sunset Magazine*, in October, 1908.

The Southern California Academy of Science had the privilege of excavating in 1908. The Los Angeles High School has also enjoyed this privilege, and now the County of Los Angeles has the right for two years, fourteen months of which still remain. The finds are placed in the Museum of History, Science and Art at Exposition Park, Los Angeles. The Museum and the ranch are acquiring great fame. Three thousand persons visited the Museum one Sunday afternoon and four hundred teachers visited the ranch in one day. At present Monday is the only visiting day at the ranch. This ruling had to be made because so many were visiting that the work was seriously interfered with.

The bones are widely scattered and are penetrated with the oil so that we have preserved not fossils, but the genuine bones of these ancient animals. They are supposed to be from the Pleocene or Pleistocene period, probably about a quarter of a million years ago, though some put the figure much higher. I can go no further in detail concerning this, one of the most interesting phases of my study. Suffice it to say that among the finds are ancient trees, a pigmy man (of more recent date) saber-toothed tigers, camels, elephants, mastodons, birds of many species, wolves, and probably the most interesting of all, the great ground sloth. Because of this wealth of treasure, Los Angeles may hope for new fame, and undoubtedly La Brea will become known all over the world within a very few years.